

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF MONTANA
MISSOULA DIVISION

CODY JOHNSTON,

Plaintiff,

vs.

CHUCK CURRY, et al.,

Defendants.

CV 18-00082-M-DLC-JCL

ORDER AND FINDINGS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS OF UNITED
STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

Plaintiff Cody Johnston, a state prisoner proceeding without counsel, filed a motion to proceed in forma pauperis (Doc. 1) and proposed complaint (Doc. 2) alleging the Defendants violated his constitutional rights during the course of criminal proceedings against him which resulted in him being found guilty of deliberate homicide. The motion to proceed in forma pauperis will be granted but Johnston's claims are barred by the doctrine set forth in *Heck v. Humphrey*, 512 U.S. 477 (1994). This matter should be dismissed.

I. MOTION TO PROCEED IN FORMA PAUPERIS

Because he is incarcerated, Johnston must pay the statutory filing fee of \$350.00. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1). The Court cannot determine the balance of Johnston's prison account from the documents submitted; therefore, the initial

partial filing fee is waived, and Johnston may proceed with the case. *See Bruce v. Samuels*, 136 S.Ct 627, 629 (2016)(“the initial partial filing fee may not be exacted if the prisoner has no means to pay it, § 1915(b)(4)”). Johnston will be required to pay the fee in installments and make monthly payments of 20% of the preceding month’s income credited to his prison trust account. The percentage is set by statute and cannot be altered. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(2). Johnston must make these monthly filing-fee payments simultaneously with the payments required in any other cases he has filed. *Id.* By separate order, the Court will direct the facility where Johnston is held to forward payments from Johnston’s account to the Clerk of Court each time the account balance exceeds \$10.00, until the filing fee is paid in full. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(2).

II. SCREENING PURSUANT TO 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915, 1915A

A. Standard

Because Johnston is a prisoner proceeding in forma pauperis, the Court must review his Complaint under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915, 1915A. Sections 1915A(b) and 1915(e)(2)(B) require the Court to dismiss a complaint filed in forma pauperis and/or by a prisoner against a governmental defendant before it is served if it is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.

A complaint is frivolous if it “lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact.” *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 325 (1989). “A case is malicious if it was filed with the intention or desire to harm another.” *Andrews v. King*, 398 F.3d 1113, 1121 (9th Cir. 2005). A complaint fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted if a plaintiff fails to allege the “grounds” of his “entitlement to relief.” *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quotation omitted).

Rule 8 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure provides that a complaint “that states a claim for relief must contain . . . a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the [plaintiff] is entitled to relief.” Fed.R.Civ.P. 8(a)(2). This rule requires a complaint to “contain sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quotations omitted).

A complaint’s allegations must cross “the line from conceivable to plausible.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 680. There is a two-step procedure to determine whether a complaint’s allegations cross that line. *See Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556; *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662. First, the Court must identify “the allegations in the complaint that are not entitled to the assumption of truth.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679, 680. Factual allegations are not entitled to the assumption of truth if they are

“merely consistent with liability,” or “amount to nothing more than a ‘formulaic recitation of the elements’ of a constitutional” claim. *Id.* at 679, 681. A complaint stops short of the line between probability and the possibility of relief where the facts pled are merely consistent with a defendant’s liability. *Id.* at 678.

Second, the Court must determine whether the complaint states a “plausible” claim for relief. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679. A claim is “plausible” if the factual allegations, which are accepted as true, “allow[] the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Id.* at 678. This inquiry is “a context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense.” *Id.* at 679 (citation omitted). If the factual allegations, which are accepted as true, “do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged—but it has not “show[n]”—“that the pleader is entitled to relief.” *Id.* (*citing* Fed.R.Civ.P. 8(a)(2)).

“A document filed *pro se* is ‘to be liberally construed,’ and ‘a *pro se* complaint, however inartfully pleaded, must be held to less stringent standards than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers.’” *Erickson v. Pardu*, 551 U.S. 89, 94 (2007); *cf.* Fed. Rule Civ. Proc. 8(e) (“Pleadings must be construed so as to do justice”).

B. Analysis

In *Heck v. Humphrey*, 512 U.S. 477 (1994), the United States Supreme Court held that “in order to recover damages for an allegedly unconstitutional conviction or imprisonment, or for other harm caused by actions whose unlawfulness would render a conviction or sentence invalid, a § 1983 plaintiff must prove that the conviction or sentence has been reversed on direct appeal,” or otherwise declared invalid, called into question by the issuance of a habeas writ, or expunged. *Id.* at 486-487.

[W]hen a state prisoner seeks damages in a section 1983 suit, the district court must consider whether a judgment in favor of the plaintiff would necessarily imply the invalidity of his conviction or sentence; if it would, the complaint must be dismissed unless the plaintiff can demonstrate that the conviction or sentence has already been invalidated. But if the district court determines that the plaintiff’s action, even if successful, will not demonstrate the invalidity of any outstanding criminal judgment against the plaintiff, the action should be allowed to proceed.

Heck, 512 U.S. at 487.

In his Complaint, Johnston indicates that he was convicted of deliberate homicide and on January 17, 2017 was sentenced to life plus ten years for deliberate homicide and tampering with evidence. (Complaint, Doc. 2 at 10.) The Montana Supreme Court website indicates that Johnston’s appeal of this sentence is pending. Johnston alleges the State’s use of information to charge him as

opposed to an indictment violated his Fifth and Fourth Amendment right to due process. He also alleges his defense counsel provided ineffective assistance of counsel, the prosecutors withheld evidence and fabricated evidence, and law enforcement conspired to hide and misconstrue evidence. (Complaint, Doc. 2 at 11-12.) A determination in this Court regarding whether any of Johnston's rights were violated during his arrest or his criminal proceedings would necessarily imply the invalidity of his conviction. As Johnston's conviction has not been reversed, declared invalid, expunged, or called into question, his claims are barred by *Heck*.

Accordingly, the Court issues the following:

ORDER

1. Johnston's Motion for Leave to Proceed in forma pauperis (Doc. 1) is GRANTED. The Clerk of Court shall waive prepayment of the filing fee.
2. The Clerk shall edit the text of the docket entry for the Complaint (Doc. 2) to remove the word "LODGED" and the Complaint is deemed filed on May 7, 2018.
3. At all times during the pendency of this action, Johnston must immediately advise the Court of any change of address and its effective date. Failure to file a notice of change of address may result in the dismissal of the

action for failure to prosecute pursuant to Fed.R.Civ.P. 41(b).

Further the Court issues the following:

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. This matter should be DISMISSED.
2. The Clerk of Court should be directed to close this matter and enter judgment pursuant to Rule 58 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.
3. The Clerk of Court should be directed to have the docket reflect that the Court certifies pursuant to Rule 24(a)(3)(A) of the Federal Rules of Appellate Procedure that any appeal of this decision would not be taken in good faith. The record makes plain the instant Complaint is frivolous as it lacks arguable substance in law or fact.

NOTICE OF RIGHT TO OBJECT TO FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF FAILURE TO OBJECT

Johnston may file objections to these Findings and Recommendations within fourteen (14) days after service (mailing) hereof.¹ 28 U.S.C. § 636. Failure to timely file written objections may bar a de novo determination by the district

¹Rule 6(d) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure provides that “[w]hen a party may or must act within a specified time after being served and service is made under Rule 5(b)(2)(C) (mail) . . . 3 days are added after the period would otherwise expire under Rule 6(a).” Therefore, since Johnston is being served by mail, he is entitled an additional three (3) days after the period would otherwise expire.

judge and/or waive the right to appeal.

This order is not immediately appealable to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. Any notice of appeal pursuant to Fed.R.App.P. 4(a), should not be filed until entry of the District Court's final judgment.

DATED this 8th day of May, 2018.

/s/ Jeremiah C. Lynch

Jeremiah C. Lynch
United States Magistrate Judge